



The Power of Positive Thinking

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It's time to work on YOU. So sit back and listen to practical, actionable advice to accelerate your progress.

You **will** benefit from what you hear over the next few minutes. Positive thinking - [dispositional optimism](#) as it's become known in the academic world - has been scientifically proven to have positive health outcomes of both mental and physical kinds. We're going to discuss what those health outcomes are, and how to transition from the negative to the positive.

Have you ever been told to smile, even though you're unhappy? At the very least, you've likely heard Nat King Cole crooning 'Smile though your heart is aching/Smile even though it's breaking/When there are clouds in the sky you'll get by.'

When you smile, [your brain releases neuropeptides](#) to help fight off stress. Then, other neurotransmitters like dopamine, serotonin, and endorphins are introduced, too. In fact, evidence suggests it is worth your while to fake a smile and see where it gets you. [Researcher Marmolejo-Ramos](#) said the muscle movements of a smile stimulate the amygdala — the part of your brain that allows you to feel emotions — by releasing neurotransmitters "to encourage an emotionally positive state."

But what about going further than smiling. What about the power of training yourself to actually think more positively?

Dispositional optimism, defined as a generalized tendency to expect positive outcomes, is associated with well-being and successful aging. In just the last year, academic papers have been produced linking a positive outlook on life to everything from [decreased feelings of](#)

[loneliness](#) to [increased pain tolerance](#). Lisa R. Yanek even found that people with a family history of heart disease who also had a positive outlook were **a third less likely** to have a heart attack or other cardiovascular event within five to 25 years than those with a more negative outlook. But the benefits of positive thinking aren't limited to health - there are also performance-related benefits.

In 1985, psychologists Michael Scheier and Charles Carver released their seminal work [Optimism, coping, and health: Assessment and implications of generalized outcome expectancies](#).

"We know why optimists do better than pessimists," says Scheier in an [interview with The Atlantic](#). "Optimists are not simply being Pollyannas; they're problem solvers who try to improve the situation." A 'Pollyanna' is an excessively cheerful person, for the record. And that's not what we're advocating for here. For an example of what Scheier's getting at, take somebody stuck in a job that isn't right for them. It might appear that an optimist would just wait it out, expecting things would get better. But actually, the opposite may be true. A negative thinker may think 'despite the fact that I hate my job, it won't be better elsewhere, so I will stay.' On the contrary, the positive thinker may understand their own value better, and see that in another job, they may be likely to offer more, and benefit more from a switch. Being optimistic isn't the same as being unrealistic.

Scheier went on to say:

Optimism is clearly associated with better psychological health, as seen through lower levels of depressed mood, anxiety, and general distress...

I think most researchers at this point would agree that optimism is connected to positive physical health outcomes, including decreases in the likelihood of re-hospitalization following surgery, the risk of developing heart disease, and mortality.

So, clearly, we should try to be more positive. But the more difficult question to answer is how to do it.

The first step is identifying **negative** thinking, so you can try to stop doing it. Let's go through some specific, common forms of negative self-talk - exaggerated or irrational thought patterns otherwise known as cognitive distortions. See if any of these seem familiar, starting with catastrophizing.

Dr Meg Jay - clinical psychologist and Associate Professor of Human Development at the University of Virginia - does a great job of explaining catastrophizing. She says, your brain is like a smoke detector.

Imagine that you're sitting at your desk at home and clearing out your inbox when the smoke alarm goes off down the hall. What's your first reaction?

- 1. Aargh! I forgot to take my food out of the oven.*
- 2. The house is on fire!*

In your day-to-day life, uncertainties are like smoke. Your job is to figure out whether the problem is burnt toast, a house fire, or just a false alarm, and respond accordingly.

Those of us who tend to catastrophize will simply assume it must be a house fire.

Another distortion is mental filtering. Somebody who does this tends to ignore the positives, and focus only on the negatives, even if the former outweigh the latter. Take an employee who receives a great performance review, made up of a host of hugely positive feedback. But that employee forgets all about that and focuses only on the single piece of constructive criticism they received. Sound like you? Then there's a good chance you may be filtering.

Arbitrary inference is a classic example of a cognitive distortion, defined by Aaron T. Beck - widely seen as the father of cognitive behavioural therapy - as "[the process of forming an interpretation of a situation, event, or experience when there is no factual evidence to support the conclusion or where the conclusion is contrary to the evidence](#)". An example of this may be if you worked on a racing car as part of a team. You had a specific job to do, and you were satisfied that you'd done that job perfectly. To the letter. In the middle of a race, the

car breaks down, and despite your earlier confidence, you automatically assume that it must have been down to what you had worked on. You have no evidence, yet you just assume it's all your fault. Most of us have probably done this before.

The final example we'll discuss today is mind reading. Have you ever sent a text to someone, and then wondered 'will they understand that I am joking?' As time passes, you become more convinced that they won't get it. That they're just going to think it's a rude, out-of-line comment. Then you see that they've read it, and they're not responding. Why aren't they responding? Oh no, it must be worse than you even thought. They're furious. This friendship might be over because this friend thinks you're insensitive, and you've deeply hurt them. And then your phone pings, and it's just a laughing emoji. They thought it was funny after all. They were busy, so they couldn't respond immediately, but you've spent the last half an hour creating a script of their thoughts. That's mind-reading, and we've all done it.

These thought patterns, these cognitive distortions, are incredibly common. But if you're working towards taking a more optimistic approach, it's a good idea to start trying to highlight them when they occur, and to try flipping your perspective. It's 3:30, your friend hasn't responded because they are probably just working, or picking up the kids - maybe they're on the toilet! The point is to try to identify these negative thought patterns and challenge them.

It's also a good idea to try to see the humor in things, to be willing to laugh at ourselves. Often, the thoughts we have as a product of catastrophizing can be comically unrealistic. It's healthy to take a step back and laugh when we realize that we've somehow gone from spotting a typo in an email we just hit send on, to wondering if we'll ever get another job once we've inevitably been sacked from this one. It's good to recognize when we're being irrational. That way, we can have a good laugh at ourselves, and then reestablish the positive mindset, and take a more realistic approach. Did we get the point across in the email? Does the typo substantively change the meaning of what was said? Is there a good chance they'll realize it's simply a typo? Awesome. Things are probably going to be great.

The main thing to remember is that switching from negative thought patterns to positive ones won't happen overnight, so don't give up! Be patient with yourself, but make sure to practice. Try to reflect each day on the events and how you responded to them. Go through the cognitive distortions, and think about where you could have applied more positivity. It may also help to read up on the benefits of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. Because the net effect of positive thinking or dispositional optimism is a better, happier, and more fruitful existence. And anyone can do it, including you.

Reading List

- [Song] [Smile](#), John Turner, Geoffrey Parsons, Nat King Cole.
- [Article] [Stuck in the Negatives? 15 Cognitive Distortions To Blame](#), PsychCentral.
- [Article] [Optimism, coping, and health: assessment and implications of generalized outcome expectancies](#), Michael F. Scheier, Charles S. Carver.
- [Article] [How the Power of Positive Thinking Won Scientific Credibility - The Atlantic](#), Hans Villarica.
- [Article] [Dispositional optimism and loneliness in older men](#), Nathaly Rius-Ottenheim, Daan Kromhout, Roos C. van der Mast, Frans G. Zitman, Johanna M. Geleijnse, Erik J. Giltay.
- [Article] [The Self-Consciousness Scale: A Revised Version for Use with General Populations](#), Michael F. Scheier, Charles S. Carver.
- [Article] [This simple tactic can 'trick' your brain into feeling happier, researchers say](#), Jade Scipioni.
- [Article] [The Real Benefits of Smiling and Laughing](#), SCL Health.
- [Article] [Arbitrary Inference](#), Dean Schuyler.
- [Article] [How a scientific framework for implying the power of optimism developed - Stanford Medicine](#), Lisa Steakley.
- [Article] [The Power of Positive Thinking](#), John Hopkins Medicine.
- [Article] [What to Do When Your Mind \(Always\) Dwells on the Worst-Case Scenario](#), Meg Jay.
- [Article] [Cognitive Therapy in the Treatment of Depression](#), Aaron T. Beck.
- [Article] [Positive thinking: Stop negative self-talk to reduce stress](#), Mayo Clinic
- [Article] [A Brief History of Aaron T. Beck, MD, and Cognitive Behavior Therapy](#), Judith S. Beck, Sarah Fleming.